

Key

to International Business Success

Intercultural Business Training

Intercultural business training has the potential to improve effective leadership and sustainable organizational development in companies that grow globally. Carried out well, it might positively affect business results. This article will tell you why investing in intercultural learning will pay off, what it takes to identify the right format for your purpose, distinguish effective from less-effective concepts, and why in times of Covid-19 intercultural training is not only feasible, but more important than ever.



“Oh no, now I see...”, exclaimed a participant in the middle of a workshop, “...now I am beginning to understand what went so horribly wrong.”

What happened? Our Dutch participant, middle manager of a producer of semiconductors with a global footprint, had understood why the collaboration with a Japanese counterpart that he had met in a meeting in the US has abruptly stalled. Culture drives our behavior and has a strong impact on our perception and interpretation of the things that go on around us. Thus, culture impacts the effectiveness of leadership and our business operations to a much higher degree than we might realize when working in an international environment.

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Intercultural business training provides professionals with the necessary tools and skills to tackle the challenges of international business interactions. This article describes different types of intercultural trainings and which concepts they are built upon in order to be effective. Special emphasis is given to an increased demand for virtual trainings because of the primary and secondary effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We argue that a culture of intercultural competence is of strategic significance for effective leadership and sustainable international company growth. As supply chains, production sites, and markets of our enterprises become more global, so do the people that work for us. The need for the “best minds” promotes global mobility to an unprecedented degree. Developers, innovators,

business strategists, sales experts ... move from the head office, e.g. in Germany, to the sites abroad, while at the same time specialists from around the globe move to the head office sites. And even for those who don't go abroad (except for occasional business trips) daily business communication becomes more and more international, as morning inboxes are filled with mails from China, Korea, or Japan, and in the afternoon Brazil, Mexico, and the US join the scene. This kind of business environment requires a substantial level of intercultural competence for individuals to perform well in their daily business.

WHY TALK ABOUT CULTURE?

Intercultural training aims at creating cultural awareness without reinforcing stereotypes. There are a lot of metaphors to de-

scribe culture and its complexity – culture is like an onion, an iceberg, a sandhill, and many more. They all describe different layers of culture and make us aware of not only how deeply rooted culture is, but also how culture influences our behavior and our perception.

Pioneers in the research field of intercultural communication like Hofstede, Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner, Hall, and House defined models of cultural value dimensions. They found cultural differences (among other factors) in the correlation between individuals and groups (e.g. Should I praise the team or the individual?), in the attitude towards hierarchy (e.g. To which extent is it expected and accepted that power within an organization is distributed unequally? How much power should my boss have?), in communication style preferences (e.g. How direct can I be when giving feedback?) or how to deal with time (e.g. How important is detailed planning?). These dimensions are meaningful if you compare cultures, but they display no absolute truth. For reflecting the individual level, we have to “zoom” (Bolten 2013), i.e. take a closer look at the concrete persons we work with.

All of us belong to multiple cultural groups, which together form part of our identity. I might be a woman as well as a German, a daughter of a US father, a mother, the eldest sister of four siblings, a trainer, a coach, an Italian-food-lover, a non-smoker, a yoga-practitioner, a dancer, and a passionate Beethoven fan. Therefore, culture must be defined not only in terms of nationality, but in a much broader context. “Every human being in modern society is part of numerous social groups on different levels and all these groups produce culture” (Rathje 2015, 5). In intercultural trainings we follow Rathje's concept of multicollectivity (Rathje 2006): Whenever people interact, a multitude of cultures are involved. (fig. 1)

All those cultures are not sharply separated from each other, but “fuzzy,” i.e. “...cultures cannot be clearly bordered; their edges appear, rather, as a confluence of diverse transcultural networks”. (Bolten 2013). So, cultural differences may be greater between an older German university professor and a teenage German hip hop fan than between Indian, German, Austrian, Canadian, Japanese, and Mexican university professors.

understanding the differences between them in order to bridge potential culture gaps and to develop new interpersonal or intergroup routines (i.e. creating an “inter-culture”).

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE – A LEARNING PROCESS

Intercultural competence means being able to act constructively in unknown or un-

stages, the focus is still on one’s own perception and world view, which is why they are called ethnocentric. It is only from the fourth stage onward that you begin to react more sensitively to intercultural issues until you can begin to switch fluently between cultures and react appropriately depending on the situation. On this highest level you decide which aspects of each culture can be integrated in order to form a



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We can find commonalities as well as differences between any culture. In addition, any behavior we may find in a person is not necessarily rooted in culture, but also might have to do with personality or with situational factors (we tend to overlook this). Therefore, in intercultural trainings it is essential that participants explore not only the cultural characteristics of their (business-) partners, but also their own, and work on

certain situations in a context-appropriate, process-reflective manner and in the interest of the actors involved, as well as being able to cope with differences and disruption (Bolten 2015). However, acting in an interculturally competent way is sometimes easier said than done. It is a learning process, described by Milton Bennett in his Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, also called DMIS. In the first three

new, unique culture, e.g. in an international team.

The following table shows the DMIS (fig. 2). According to our experience, reality is of course less linear and more complex. Still, almost all the statements we hear in our international work can be allocated to one of these stages. We hope that this will come in handy to you, our reader, when you in-

teract with a colleague, client, supplier, network partner, etc. As you listen, you will be better equipped to understand where she or he currently stands and what kind of action from your end would be most appropriate.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS TRAINING

Based on evolving understanding of what culture is and does and new insights on how learning works, both content and didactic approaches in intercultural business trainings have changed substantially over time (fig. 3).

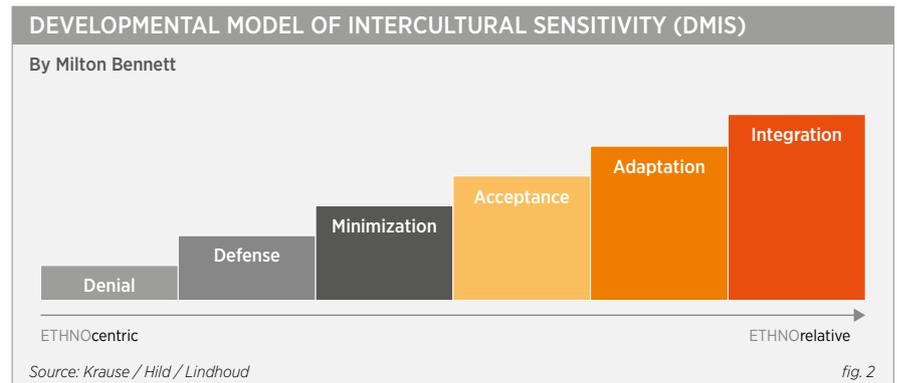
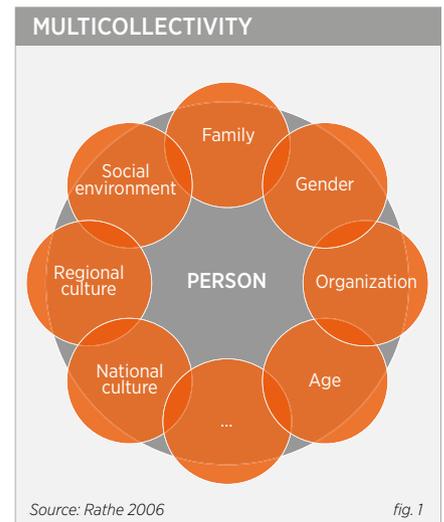
The most basic stage, let's call it Intercultural Training 1.0, is characterized by a clearly bordered, containerlike concept of culture and a behavioristic understanding of learning. All dos and don'ts fall under this category. The shortcomings of this approach are close at hand: a high risk of mismatch between the dos and don'ts and the "real" persons in front of you.

This, of course, does not mean that all dos and don'ts are completely useless. If, for example, you follow the "Do consider bringing a little gift to your potential Chinese business partner" or "Don't keep your German business partner waiting", there is certainly no harm in that and helps people to orientate quickly. It is interesting to see that even today participants as well as those who commission intercultural training often still want just that: "dos and don'ts." Trainers should use this very carefully and always frame it appropriately, like "When in Brazil, you might encounter the following...".

The next stage, let's call it Intercultural Training 2.0, is characterized by identifying and contrasting deeper levels of origins of behavior and perception (see section on cultural dimensions above). Based on the assumption that people around the globe have systematically different approaches to communication, hierarchy, time, identity,

risk, etc., the above-mentioned scholars set out to measure these differences. Their work, known as Cultural Dimensions, is a good basis for showing difference as being something normal and used for reflection on potentially deeper origins of differing behavior.

So, for example, it would be reasonable to assume that the employees of the Japanese company you are about to visit to close a deal rank high on the cultural dimension power distance. This might guide you through the planning process on how to put together the delegation of your company.



INTERCULTURAL TRAINING				
	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0
Development stages	Behavioristic, informative	Contrasting values	Process oriented	Incorporating neuroscience

Source: Krause / Hild / Lindhoud fig. 3

WHAT MAKES INTERCULTURAL LEARNING FORMATS EFFECTIVE				
	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0
	Behavioristic, informative	Contrasting values	Process oriented	Incorporating neuroscience
Country specific trainings	✓	✓		
International Leadership	✓	✓	✓	
Intercultural Team		✓	✓	✓
Global Business (General Cultural Awareness)		✓	✓	✓
Intercultural Coaching			✓	✓
Intercultural Mediation			✓	✓

Source: Krause / Hild / Lindhoud fig. 4

Although it is a valuable starting point for reflection and further steps to cultural adaptation, there are limitations and shortcomings to the Cultural Dimension approach as well. First, what often happens is that the position of a country on a scale is often confused with the description of a concrete person's behavior. Knowing that such positions are the result of a high quantity of interviews, it is obvious that they only show one thing: the average value of replies from people of the country. They usually don't provide information on the variety of individual answers and the according bandwidth. Because of this lack of detailed information, the door for further stereotyping is wide open ("In Russia the uncertainty avoidance index is such, hence..."). Second, people often try to create ex-ante predictions of behavior after having looked at scales like this. This can only work to a very limited degree. Another alternative is more promising. Let's reconsider a certain situation and then look at whether the cultural dimensions provide us with some explanatory hypotheses on what might be contributing factors to this behavior.

Both examples illustrate the immense responsibility of the facilitator. Has she / he fully understood what is being measured by a particular dimension? Can she / he present the cultural dimensions in a differentiated way, so that participants have a chance to make use of them without further stereotyping? Do they realize that looking at cultural dimensions is just the beginning of developing further cultural sensitivity?

It is better to focus on the involved people themselves. Intercultural Training 3.0 is characterized by its process orientation and people focus. Here people (intercultural teams, leaders in international firms, etc.) are encouraged to negotiate their culture among each other. Culture is not something that is but rather something that takes place (Bolten 2015).

This kind of interaction requires a lot of skill from intercultural trainers. As process facilitators, they need to organize deep reflections of peoples' own cultural imprint. Metaphorically, they must help people to extract the inside of the iceberg and bring it up to the surface. Like this, basic assumptions, implicit expectations, and culture-bound imaginations of "the normal" reach the conscious level and become negotiable. Apart from providing necessary input, they should have an "asking attitude". They should be able to encourage the group to slow down and go deep, in order to avoid sticking to the all too obvious.

Cultural research was most often a domain of anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists, but recently a new discipline has joined the scene: neuroscience (Shaules 2015; Casey 2017). The impact on Intercultural Training 4.0 is still emerging. While on the one hand, neuroscientific evidence for the psychological findings of the Cultural Dimensions is appearing (Han 2017; Nisbett 2003), facilitators are experimenting with new techniques like mindfulness or culture shock simulations. Considering the affective components in the processing of perception (Kahneman 2011), it becomes more and more obvious that culture has a feel to it that must not be underestimated. Participants are encouraged to realize that their first, intuitive individual reaction to a certain thing (an e-mail, the way somebody says something, a photo, etc.) is an output of their intuitive mind and as such is not "wrong" or something to be ashamed of. Realizing that this emotional reaction is also culturally driven and one out of many possible reactions, and that by processing the same situation through the attentive mind may bring up a different interpretation, the options for treating a certain situation widen significantly.

Apart from knowledge about the field of cultural neuroscience, facilitators need to dare to lead their participants through respective situations and processes in a re-

sponsible way. According to our experience all the approaches outlined above serve their purpose, however they should be applied consciously and fit the desired outcome, hence the setting of the specific training.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTERCULTURAL TRAININGS AND WHAT THEY ARE GOOD FOR

Providers of intercultural business training offer a variety of formats, ranging from country specific measures to general cultural awareness, from leadership over team collaboration to going abroad, from training over coaching to conflict resolution.

- ▶ **Country specific training** for a certain country is primarily chosen for people who go abroad, e.g. to China, or for staff who collaborate mostly with people from one specific country, e.g. India.
- ▶ **International leadership training** is for managers who lead culturally diverse employees and need to integrate people from different cultures in multicultural teams.
- ▶ **Intercultural team training** builds the foundations of effective teamwork and help people with a different cultural background to increase trust and productivity in daily teamwork.
- ▶ **Global business (general cultural awareness) training** increases intercultural agility and awareness of other cultures and is therefore ideal for those who have regular contact with foreign business partners.
- ▶ **Intercultural coaching** is for people who want to work on their personal goals and challenges, e.g. for a foreign assignment or leading an international team.
- ▶ **Intercultural mediation** integrates intercultural perspectives into a conflict resolution process and thus helps to resolve the conflict effectively.

Following table shows which approaches (see above: development stages on intercultural trainings) intercultural learning formats should put an emphasis on to be effective. We hope

that this will be helpful for you, our reader, when you are about to design or evaluate a concrete concept or proposal (fig. 4).

INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS TRAINING AS A DRIVER OF ECONOMIC SUCCESS

Above we argued that intercultural business training may have an impact on effective leadership and sustainable growth of organizations. When we think of effective

tiative, expectations towards leaders / subordinates, etc. are highly culturally influenced, it becomes evident that – leading internationally – culture plays a crucial role in making leadership work. Learning how to take culture into account when leading people from around the globe should be an integral part of any leadership career in a company because it will avoid expensive misunderstandings, conflicts, and brain drain and at the same time drive identity, motivation, and innovation.

same time be highly culturally shaped. This can be systematically promoted (instead of being left to chance) through intercultural business workshops for all individuals and teams that are active in value-creating positions in an international working environment. Carried out effectively (see above), they will positively affect the sustainable international growth of organizations.

As the Covid-19 pandemic forces us to work online, good communication skills

About Sietar

SIETAR – Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research – was founded in the United States in 1974 to draw together professionals engaged in various forms of intercultural learning and engagement research and training. Since then national organizations have been formed in Europe and other regions worldwide. SIETAR Germany serves as a platform for professional and interdisciplinary dialogue concerning intercultural issues in science, economics, and the broader society. Our focus is on people who are interested in intercultural questions and challenges and who

live or work in an intercultural context, be it daily-life activities or in the areas of research, training, consulting, education, and the media.



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leadership, we think of leadership that motivates, inspires, enables, and gives direction. This conceptualization as such is already culturally tainted. If, for example, we ask our participants from around the globe “Should a business leader have at hand ad hoc and precise answers to any of the questions her / his subordinates may raise about their work?”, the vast majority of East Asian participants reply with yes while only a small minority of Central and North European participants agree to this statement. Whether or not leadership is effective can only be measured by how well it works.

Supposing that such things as motivation, feedback, role understanding, taking ini-

In the past two decades many companies with a global footprint implemented a matrix structure, where particular employees would at the same time be part of the hierarchical line in a certain legal entity somewhere on this planet while at the same time report on factual matters to someone else – somewhere else. They would work in virtual teams with colleagues from all over, connected by a topic or a project only. Today more and more organizations or organizational units “go agile”.

In all these forms of international collaboration it is essential that communication styles, understanding of role and responsibilities as well as planning routines match while at the

are essential to work effectively together. This requires a very high level of intercultural competence in building international relationships and “reading between the lines”. Intercultural business training is therefore more important than ever – and with some adaptations can be delivered online as well.

WHAT CHANGES IN TIMES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

Facilitating a training in an online format is challenging, especially when the topic needs self-reflection, and a high level of cultural awareness must be achieved, but if we consider a few things, it works very

well. Intercultural training, as shown before, is usually very interactive and involves role plays and simulations as well as discussions and working on case studies. Learning requires minds that are free from anxiety, and this again requires trust. So, the questions are: How can we establish an intimate and safe learning space in a virtual classroom? How can trust be established? How can cultural awareness be raised?

In online intercultural training we use video, chats, reaction buttons with an emoji, screen sharing functions, whiteboards, and external apps for collaboration and brainstorming. Breakout sessions in breakout rooms are an excellent opportunity to split training participants into separate, smaller rooms. Role-plays and case studies work perfectly in breakout sessions. When training online, we visit the breakout session and give feedback in an intimate setting.

Poll options and annotation tools can be used to add information to shared screens. Additional tools, e.g. online collaborative whiteboard platforms offer the same possibilities as a classroom flipchart or a pin board. Interactivity is not optional, it is a must, as the attention span in a virtual environment can be shorter than in a classroom training. (Kunert 2020). A clear process, a well-structured agenda and transparent netiquette about communication during the online training, is essential and will foster the learning motivation.

Elements of informality, such as small talk in the beginning, digital coffee-talks as well as virtual ice-breakers – when everybody is invited to share something personal – can help participants relax and connect and is a precondition for open discussions and building trust. The trainer can establish digital closeness by actively balancing the focus on task, on relationship, and on dialogue.

A good example for a game to raise cultural awareness is the following memorizing

game (Thiagarajan 2016). Participants are sent – e.g. into their breakout rooms – documents with a text which they are asked to memorize. Later, when the breakout rooms are closed and the documents aren't visible anymore, they must memorize and present their text in front of the others. The key point is that they have been given slightly different texts – which they do not know. When presenting in the plenary session the perception of those participants with a different text is that the presenters memorize wrongly. This shows us how easily we categorize in terms of “right” and “wrong” without having in mind that the other person “just” learnt another text. This interactive online game is very efficient as well as fun.

One of the challenges of virtual training is the lack of physical mobility. A good relationship between the physical environment and the body reduces stress and improves concentration. So, in coffee breaks participants should be encouraged to stand up, move around, and leave their desks.

The online trainer must bear in mind that when training virtually the focus is more on spoken language than on body language. Therefore, the audio environment is a key communication channel within the virtual working environment and needs more attention. The intercultural online trainer must especially make an enormous integration effort to get a comprehensive picture of the situation when people from different cultural backgrounds are participating. Silence, for example, can have different meanings in different cultures, so a high level of intercultural competence of the trainer is required.

FINAL THOUGHT

Let's return to our Dutch workshop participant at the beginning of this article. In the training, he realized that he had used the wrong approach when previously communicating to his colleague based in the

Japanese branch of the same company. The communication was made in front of others in a very direct way to a colleague who was one hierarchical level higher. “We should have taken this training long ago” – is something we have heard more than one time. ●

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